

The Man Who Was in Love with the Past

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"The essential function of the teacher is the transmission of tradition. The values which he or she conveys to the next generation are values of content and method. In the case of the historian the transmission of the knowledge of the past...is the content of the historian's science."

HE WAS an unprepossessing man. He looked, indeed, as though he were a near relative of the Sitwells and he gave one the impression of an absent presence. One, on first meeting him, did not suspect that he was a great lecturer and an acute observer of present and past. His judgment of Ernest Renan was as knowledgeable and as unfavorable as Albert Schweitzer's derogatory picture of Renan. However, one felt that he might have said, as he no doubt reported Renan as saying, "Do not think that you are listening to me. You are hearing history speaking." He would, of course, never have applied Renan's words to himself, both because he was too modest and because he was less certain about the course and meaning of the past than was Renan.

Still, his lecture courses on Greek and Roman history and "The History of History" were crowded. His students were not only the future historians and intellectuals but also the more ordinary Illinois farm-boy and farm-girl types even though they might be urban dwellers one generation distant from the farm. Veterans, just returned from World War II, gave the audience a certain earnestness though the "jocks" lightened the atmosphere with their *sotto voce* remarks. Seminars were relatively small in the late 1940s and early 1950s, though most of

those who worked in Professor Joseph Ward Swain's seminar went on to finish doctoral dissertations under his direction.

Swain lectured from a carefully prepared set of notes, each topic contained in a manila folder. One day he appeared in class with a folder from one of his other courses and proceeded to lecture us on a topic unrelated to the course we were studying. No one dared call the mistake to his attention—nor did anyone snicker, not even the "jocks." At last it dawned on him that something was wrong and he beat a flustered retreat.

He was attentive to differing styles in lecturing. Of his contemporary at Columbia University, Preston Slosson, who made a great reputation for himself as a lecturer at the University of Michigan and ran for Congress on the Democratic ticket, Swain observed derisively, "he has fathomed the Freshman mind." Of one of his masters at Columbia University, the great Carlton J.H. Hayes, later ambassador to Franco Spain, Swain told how Hayes kept his lecture notes on blue and white cards, seven white cards to one blue. The blue cards contained supposed jokes and students prepared themselves for the advent of the blue card by laughter in advance.

At Columbia Swain had been a contemporary of the "failed priest" and later

popular historian Will Durant. They were students together in a course on the Enlightenment taught by John Dewey. Dewey for some time discussed *The Encyclopedia*. Finally Durant summoned his courage and raised his hand. "Professor Dewey," he said, "you have mentioned *The Encyclopedia* a number of times. Just which encyclopedia do you mean?" In outrage Dewey replied, "Why! *The Encyclopedia, The Encyclopedia!*"

Swain was born in 1891 and the cast of his mind was essentially Edwardian. The authors he read were the great Edwardians and their contemporaries on the Continent. He shared their mood of elegant existential anxiety. Still, the note of hope rather than despair was dominant in his thought. He was fond of quoting G.K. Chesterton's "Ballad of Suicide":

*The gallows in my garden, people say,
Is new and neat and adequately tall....*

*...The strangest whim has seized me....
After all
I think I will not hang myself today.*

The Edwardian religious and political crisis, the mood which culminated in World War I, he paralleled by the religious and political crisis of the ancient world at the moment when Christianity was born and the *ecumene* was subsumed into the Roman Empire. For Swain, the time of the breaking of nations and the birth of Christian Universalism, so like the historical situation of his own day, bore out the words of the poet Virgil, "*sunt lacrimae rerum*" (things have tears in them), a line of poetry he often quoted.

The religious crisis of the Edwardian era was one in which Swain participated. As an undergraduate at Beloit College he had studied with James Arnold Blaisdell, Professor of Biblical Literature, "My first and best teacher of Ancient History." At

Columbia, where he took his Ph.D. in 1912, his professors Hayes and Moon had become converts to Catholicism and in 1913 when he went to Paris for study at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes his roommate, Randolph Bourne, was later to become a Catholic convert. Swain's doctoral dissertation, "The Greek Origins of Christian Asceticism," underlined his religious preoccupations. When he arrived in Paris the Catholic Modernist controversy was at its peak and his interest in Alfred Loisy and George Tyrell continued throughout his life. In 1915 Swain published his translation of Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. The translation, the first of Durkheim's works to appear in English, had little initial success in the English-speaking world. Its importance was recognized by American sociologists only after World War II in spite of Merton's work. Old and New Testament criticism was a major focus of his interests. This interest was that of an expert rather than a dilettante as is demonstrated by his path-breaking article on the Book of Daniel, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire" (*Classical Philology*, XXXV 1944, 73-94).

It is interesting to speculate that he heard John N. Figgis lecturing or was acquainted with his publications. Figgis had been Lord Acton's only student and Swain was a devotee of Lord Acton. Of course, Swain studied the Cambridge writers of Acton's day carefully: William Robertson Smith and Sir James G. Frazier. Above all, few Americans knew the works of Cardinal Newman as well as Swain knew them. After Swain's death his wife sent me, carrying out instructions in a note Swain left, the Charles Frederick Harold edition of Newman's works. Add to this the fact that Swain had more than an acquaintance with the thought of the Baron von Hügel.

One might suppose, on the basis of

these intellectual affinities, that Swain, like so many of his generation, was edging toward Rome. That supposition would neglect the other Swain, the learned skeptic, and it would neglect the religious history of his family. Swain outlined that history in a long note appended to the chapter on "Imperial Idealism and Early Christianity" in *The Ancient World* (vol. II).

...I have been told that, soon after the English translation of Renan's book [*The Life of Jesus*] appeared in this country, my Grandfather—a Congregational minister in a New England city—procured a copy. His father, then an elderly man, picked up the volume, glanced over the first few pages, was so horrified that in that book he read no more. My grandfather persevered to the end, commented that "M. Renan forgets that Christianity rests not on the Sermon on the Mount but upon Calvary," and consoled himself with the reflection that "America is still too profoundly Christian a nation to be disturbed by one more infidel book." Several years later my father read the book and was converted by it. I first read the *Vie de Jésus* in my student days. I admired its beautiful French prose but I could not understand the commotion it caused.

Swain, the learned skeptic, was in his attitudes not unlike another of his great enthusiasms, Edward Gibbon. Throughout his lifetime Swain read and studied Gibbon for pleasure. Swain's great Gibbon book was never written. Along the way he published a fragment of what might have been.

He described himself as an Episcopalian. However, one day when we were discussing the Unitarian religiosity of Albert Schweitzer, a man and an intellectual Swain much admired, he said, "I should probably be a Unitarian but those Unitarians are such queer fellows."

He knew that the place of the intellectual was in the academy and not in the political lists. Still, he was an acute ob-

server of the political and social agonies of his own time. I never discussed politics with him but I would describe his values as those of an aristocratic, conservative anti-democrat. Democracy was, in his eyes, exemplified in Cleon, the hot-dog salesman and mini-tyrant of the Athens of the Peloponnesian War. The Athenian declension from Pericles to Cleon seemed to Swain to have been what one ought to have expected. Of the Greek dramatists Swain most admired Aristophanes and Euripides. The classical historians he most admired were Thucydides and Tacitus.

No doubt these tastes were conditioned by his hostility to militarism and war. He had served briefly in the United States Army in World War I. Like the majority of the intellectuals of his day he viewed American intervention in World War I as a disaster. He laughed at one of his colleagues, a very sedentary man, who had exercised violently in order to get his weight down so that he could volunteer for service only to discover after the war that American intervention had been a mistake. In his attitude to war Swain had the experience of Greece and Rome constantly in his mind.

As the 1930s drew to a close the hope for peace in Europe dimmed. Swain set to work to explore the intellectual and political roots of the twentieth century, His book *Beginning the Twentieth Century* was widely acclaimed though its influence diminished as World War II began to eat up the intellectual energies of the Western world. As that war approached Swain found himself in the "Isolationist" camp. The history department at the University of Illinois where Swain was a senior professor was badly divided between isolationists and interventionists. The history of this conflict is, however, an interesting study for some future historian. It should be clear, however, that Swain and his fellow anti-interventionists were not partisans of Fascism. On

the contrary, they saw the war as destructive of the freedom and the values which they believed to be distinctively American.

The essential function of the teacher is the transmission of tradition. The values which he or she conveys to the next generation are values of content and method. In the case of the historian the transmission of the knowledge of the past, those human experiences which are the ground of present-day existence, is the content of the historian's science (ordered enquiry). But this past is never the dead past. It lives on into the present and manifests itself, for good or ill, in contemporary life. Moreover, the great historians know that past better and more fully than those contemporary with the events which constitute the past knew it. This is the great and enduring meaning of John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*—that the past in its fullness can be known only in future time.

The transmission of tradition is not simply the transmission of content but the transmission of the method by which that content can be known and understood. It was for this reason that Swain's course on "The History of History" was so important to me and to his other students. It was for this reason that the seminars in which he taught the methods of both negative and positive (*Schöpferisch*) historical criticism were essential to our historical understanding.

Swain was the heir of the great revolution in historical studies which developed out of the seventeenth-century French savant's invention of the tools, the ancillary sciences of historical analysis, and the distinctive historical consciousness which resulted from German historicism. For Swain these two traditions were most manifest in Ancient History and more particularly in the higher criticism of Biblical Studies. He knew,

above all, that these were not exact sciences and that the historian had constantly to be on guard against his own tendencies to error. These tendencies to error were checked, in a measure, by the community of scholarship. Albert Schweitzer's critique of New Testament scholarship, *In Quest of the Historical Jesus*, demonstrated how wrong historians might be. It was imperative, Swain believed, for historians to take the chance; to read the documents in a sense in which they had not been previously read. No doubt Swain was sometimes mistaken, and no doubt he was sometimes overly bold. Even as a graduate student I recognized this to be the case but I recognized too that there was greatness in his daring. He taught us sympathetic identification (*Einfühlung*) with the past and a critical methodology by which the past could be known.

But, of course, without kindness and generosity of spirit these intellectual virtues would have been empty and meaningless. The next generation was very important to Swain. He bore out the fact that the identification and nurturing of talent is the mark of a great teacher.

As an undergraduate I majored in philosophy although I took an equal number of hours in history. As I finished my undergraduate work Swain one day spoke with me. "I have been discussing your work with Professor Charles Odegaard [chairman of the fellowship committee], and if you decide to do graduate work in history the department will award you a fellowship." I was enormously flattered. I did not financially need the fellowship and I was a bit embarrassed at the thought of being bought and so I declined the fellowship but became a graduate student in history.

This was the first of many kindnesses my wife and I were to receive from the hands of Swain and his remarkable and gracious wife, Margaret Hatfield Swain. He set me on the road to study abroad.

He advised me and in his awkward way guided me. He and his wife were happy at the birth of our children. He drove me to Chicago and introduced me to the academic world of history at the meeting of the American Historical Association. It was he and his friend, Charles Odegaard, then Dean of the Literary College at the University of Michigan, who secured for me my first appointment.

Above all he shaped my mind with the books he urged me to read and later discussed with me. Lord Acton and Jacob Burckhardt stood at the center of that world. As a consequence I wrote a doctoral dissertation on the subject of Acton's mentor, Ignaz von Döllinger.

During the last three summers of my graduate work my wife and I were em-

ployed as lookouts by the Forest Service in the Sawtooth Mountains of central Idaho. Our lookout was atop a 10,000 foot peak. One evening I hiked 4,000 feet down the trail to the road in order to pick up the mail and a sack of flour. In the mail was a fat envelope containing articles from various sources and reviews he had clipped from *The New York Times*. Among those reviews was the laudatory review of Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind* (1953). Swain had no idea how revolutionary that book would become nor any idea of its influence on me. It is one of the mysteries associated with the great teacher that he is usually unaware of the movements of the Spirit he excites in his students.